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Book Review: Halfbreed: The Remarkable True Story of George Bent - Caught Between the Worlds of the Indian and the White Man

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Halfbreed: The Remarkable True Story of George Bent—Caught Between the Worlds of the Indian and the White Man. By David Fridtjof Halaas and Andrew E. Masich. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004. xv + 458 pp. Maps, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. $30.00 cloth, $17.95 paper.

George Bent (1843-1918) was the son of the proprietor of Bent's Fort. His mother was Southern Cheyenne, the daughter of a Keeper of the Medicine Arrows. Schooled in Missouri and a veteran of the Confederate Army, he returned to his mother's people to survive the Sand Creek massacre and to participate (though to what extent remains unclear) in the Plains warfare that ensued. After a little more than a year with the insurgents, he became himself an Indian trader and then a government interpreter who often acted as a go-between for whites seeking to profit from the Cheyennes' confinement to their Oklahoma reservation. As an interpreter, he also worked with James Mooney and George Bird Grinnell during their visits to collect cultural material in Oklahoma.

In the last two decades of his life Bent became a prolific letter-writer as well; more than five hundred of his letters survive in various archives. His chief correspondents were Grinnell, with whom he collaborated in shaping the foundational texts of Cheyenne history and ethnography, and George Hyde, who also worked with Grinnell and supplied him with a great deal of information gleaned from his own far more extensive correspondence with Bent. Bent's letters to Hyde became the basis for Hyde's *Life of George Bent: Written from His Letters* (essentially completed by 1916, but not published until 1968), which *Halfbreed* seeks now to replace.

Halaas and Masich's research far exceeds anything that the totally deaf and nearly blind Hyde, almost wholly dependent on the good offices of the Omaha Public Library, was able to accomplish at the turn of the last century. Their list of sources is impressive and worth the careful attention of anyone deeply interested in Bent, in High Plains military history, or in the history of the Cheyennes. Halaas and Masich also tell a far more exciting and colorful tale. Though in Hyde's narrative Bent comes across as well informed (indeed about many political and military developments he actually couldn't have known about; such are the unfortunate liberties biographers sometimes take), it is mostly free of personal detail and, except when it comes to events like Sand Creek, even personal affect. His life moves on in something of a straight line, with victories and defeats to be sure (though these are collective, not personal), but with no particular arc.

The Bent on offer in this new life is a man who feels, wonders, worries, rages, doubts, triumphs, and despairs. He lives in a world of sight and sound, of cold and heat (indeed, there are frequent descriptions of the weather). He strives for recognition as a warrior among the Dog Soldiers and becomes, eventually, something of a tribal leader in persuading the Cheyenne chiefs to sign the Medicine Lodge Treaty. Still, caught between two cultures, he never achieves the status he wanted and perhaps deserved. With the passing of the Old West, his position grows yet more marginal, and he becomes a notorious drunk. Needing money (he had three wives!), he gets caught up in shady dealings at the expense of his fellow Cheyennes and, ultimately, redeems himself only by his efforts to preserve Cheyenne culture and history through his writing and ethnographic collaborations.

While I'd agree certainly with the latter points, I have problems with the overall thrust of this book, as well as with certain of its details. In their effort to make Bent's life into a "good story," with far more narrative

interest than Hyde could provide, Halaas and Masich take a good many liberties of their own. The major historians of the Cheyennes, and Cheyenne memory itself, would not agree with them that Bent was an important warrior or that, in his role as an interpreter, he actually "negotiated" (as is claimed here, p. 314) the Medicine Lodge Treaty. Though Bent claimed to have been on twenty-seven war parties, he also said he'd never counted coup. The authors must have been aware of this inconvenient fact, but they suppress it (its source, but not the fact itself, is cited p. 389, n. 61). In his own writing Bent was notably reticent about his personal feelings, and other documentary evidence to this effect is sparse. Almost all the descriptions of how he felt and what he thought on particular occasions—and these are liberally salted throughout the text—are thus the authors' suppositions. They do not make this clear. Indeed, though their extensive citations make it seem the preponderance of these claims is documented, most of the sources cited actually contain no such information. No "would haves," "could haves," or "might haves" alert the reader to these occasions; all such statements are made in the declarative mood.

Even more problematic is the invention of episodes presented as if they'd actually happened. Thus, to cite just one, when Bent returns to his father's ranch for the first time after Sand Creek, he arrives with a companion "just as the Bents were sitting down to enjoy their Christmas dinner. The dinner stopped abruptly when the two Indians stepped into the candlelit hall. At first no one recognized them. . . . But George spoke up, perhaps even wished them 'Merry Christmas,' and the family rushed to meet them" (p. 159). Much other colorful detail precedes and surrounds this event, including a detailed tete-à-tete the next day between father and son. Sources are cited in the endnotes, but they don't support this scenario. George may have seen his father "one month" after the November 29 Sand Creek massacre (the evidence is ambiguous, given what he says in his letter to Hyde, 5-16-1905, Beinecke Library, Yale), and for the authors of *Halfbreed* this means Christmas. From that they imagine all the rest. In doing so, however, they forget or overlook that such a meeting would not have occurred at the ranch but, as Bent says, at "my father's camp . . . 25 miles above his ranch on Las Animas river" (letter to Hyde, 3-15-1905, Beinecke). This Christmas tale isn't history and, given its fundamental inaccuracy, shouldn't even qualify as docu-drama.

In the eighty-seven years since Bent died there have been only two biographies, published thirty-six years apart. It will likely be some time before another is published; let's hope it's more trustworthy.

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